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AMERICAN ART—ITS WEAKNESSES AND THEIR REMEDY.

WHEN the young man, fresh from the tutelage of his school, sought an introduction to Kaulbach and presented his card, the distinguished master, repeating the superscription, "Angelo Mahler, Artist," exclaimed: "Oh! an artist! delighted to know you; that is what I am endeavoring to be." No term has been more misunderstood, and, as a consequence, misapplied, than that of *artist*. This misapprehension has tended not only to degrade the title, but, indirectly, the recipient of the same. To go further: in no country, perhaps, is this laxity more apparent than in our own, where to be artist is to be specialist in any sphere of activity, whether that activity pertain to the brain, heels or hands. It is in vain to trace the many mutations through which the word has passed; the uses to which it has been erroneously put, or to search the possible evils which have insidiously followed in their wake; it is enough that in employing the term in its best signification we keep constantly in mind its unvarying association with the products of the *creative* imagination. Indeed, so many are the elements which enter into the notion of "artist," so many the requirements upon which alone it can safely rest, that the mere enumeration will make manifest the dignity of the term, and how slender are the props upon which so many found their claims to it.

The artistic energy works not in one direction, or, rather, is not exhibited under a single aspect. Just as there are degrees to all the intellectual faculties, and channels through which they find their appropriate development and natural expression, so an analogous condition obtains in that phase of the intelligence which is manifested in artistic production; and, just as there are degrees to the dignity and power of the mind's work, so are there gradations to that which seeks its embodiment in things of beauty. The same intimate relationship which exists between mental power and its external expression in the more common fields of labor, is as clearly indicated in the field of art, and the mental calibre of an artist being gauged, one may, with some degree of certainty, foreshadow the limits of his accomplishment, and the value of his work.

Art is the creative effort of the imagination exercised in the domain of pure beauty, and its aim is to bring satisfaction and delight and instruction by an appeal to the feelings, sentiments and passions, and, as moral and intellectual beauty, rather than physical, are the ultimate goal, he who has searched the depths of nature and delved into her hidden mysteries, he who has explored beyond the mere surface of things and attained to the source of life and action, is best fitted to make that appeal to the sympathies of his kind. The basis of all art is knowledge, and where it is erected upon any other foundation its conclusions will be immature, and its efforts terminate in partial success, in error, or in falsehood. While, therefore, it is quite true that some allowance must be made for the natural acquirements, and while it is also true that the same application and exertion will not necessarily produce like effects, still, it is safe to say that nothing will ever compensate in the long run for the lack of proper mental cultivation, of the acquisition of the material by and through which the imagination is nourished and stimulated. Says Johnson: "Imagination is useless without knowledge; nature in vain gives the power of combination, unless study and observation supply the materials to be combined." But the mere ability to absorb and assimilate, conjoined to freedom of imagination, will not, in themselves, prove all-sufficient; united to these must be the representative faculty which reproduces in a sensible form and in the perfection of a finished work the idealizations of the artistic phantasy. The artist thus endowed by nature, strengthened and reinforced by his studies, breaks from his swaddling clothes as soon as he becomes productive.

Gauged by the results of his labors, the artistic worker assumes a higher or lower rank in proportion to the mentality of his efforts. Mere technical capacity, therefore, however essential an element to the concrete expression, is not *per se* creative, whether it seeks to interpret the thoughts of poet or musician, or more directly to copy the handiwork of nature herself. We would hardly call him a skillful mechanic who, with his model before him, sets about the copying of wheel, or axle, or spindle, or crank; but, rather, him who with wheel and axle and spindle and crank by his cunning combination evolves an original idea, and adds to the stock of useful and beneficial things. And yet, year by year, we hear the claims of those whose artistic worth has never risen above a faithful copy of jugs and

decanters, of flowers, or, perchance, a head to which some poetical title has been affixed. To such an one, the vista of artistic life is but opening; he may rank with the dilettante and virtuoso, and hope, perhaps, to take his place within the circle of the elect. So with the mannerist, who, having developed one aspect of artistic activity, seeks to imbue all his subjects with the same expression, to subordinate them to the only means which his restricted powers have called forth. Fuseli paints him as "the paltry epitomist of nature's immense volume; a juggler who pretends to mimic the infinite variety of her materials by the vain display of a few fragments of pottery." In that he has evolved and embodied one form of individuality, he is, by so much, a rank higher in the scale; but he is still far off from the goal and the priceless prize. Thus, step by step, in similar gradation we attain to the true artist, the master, who, enriched and partly equipped by nature, endowed with sensibility and passion, with fancy and imagination, with the culture acquired by devoted study, with the love for unalloyed beauty born of purity of thought and knowledge of the high mission of his art; to that artist who, spurning the commonplace, the low, the debasing, the corrupt, makes the effort of his life a yearning after that perfection of which the vestiges remain as a promise of the past and a prophecy of the future.

One of the greatest misfortunes to art resides in the fact that its pursuit is so attractive, so alluring, that he who has once experienced its insouciance, its freedom from social restrictions, its happy indifference and community of ideas—he who has comprehended the dignity of the calling and the fullness of its reward—seldom renounces, however much he has missed his vocation, the hope of success. In a moment of inspiration the country clod is fired with the ambition of becoming a doctor, and so leaves his barn, his cattle and his plow, and seeks the hospitable shelter of a city medical school, and, at the end of his allotted term, is pushed into the world. His field is the human body; his success is measured as he cures or kills; all are alike able to measure by this simple standard, and should he fail, he is quickly rated at what he is worth, sinks again into his wide oblivion, and returns to his plow and his manures. And yet he kills only the body, whilst the artist may destroy the soul. Indeed, the faculty appealed to by the arts is so mysterious, so subtle, so incomprehensible, that when we have said that tastes differ, we have, perhaps, given the only possible explanation why bad art may live side by side, in seeming harmony with good art, why any art, if such it might be called, finds a market and a price; a perversion of the end as curious as if in medicine the practitioner should succeed only in producing malformation on the teacher, illogical and irrational scholars. Unfortunately the field of the so-called artist is as wide as human ignorance, and however great the demand for unworthy work, there will always be found hands ready to do it. That so many failures pass unnoticed, that so many laboriously labor on in the barren hope of reward, is to be attributed, more or less, to the fact that the needs and requirements of the artistic life are so vaguely or rather ignorantly apprehended. A taste and affection for the true, the beautiful and the good may be inspired in all; no mind so utterly brutish but may be taught to recognize and appreciate them at their worth. But there is a wide gulf between the merely receptive and creative faculties, the unhappy overlooking of which in our art of to-day has contributed more than aught else to obliterate the border line where half art ends and full art begins.

They who have studied attentively the progress of American art, have observed the failure to attain any high mental grade, the constant repetition of things, not ideas, which seldom rise above the level of more or less clever reproduction, efforts of pure manual dexterity, in which there appears to be a total disassociation between the body and the soul, habit usurping the place of originality, and technique that of the imagination. May we not look for the explanation in the neglect of that culture which the most competent authorities have deemed a prerequisite to the artist's vocation? It may be true that there are natural faculties which, at times, despite all rule and reason, o'erleap the barriers between ignorance and fame, but it is, nevertheless, a more patently recognized fact that the average intelligence, backed by persistent, well directed labor, has accomplished far more for the happiness and well-being of our race. Compare for a moment the lives of our rising artists with those of the Renaissance in Italy, not in the character of the work produced, but in the character of the mind exhibited. Compare the preparation, the standard of knowledge set, the result. Take almost any name of that great period, and note the diversity of power

manifested, the wide extent of education. Is it a bare chance that made mastership in art and eminent scholarship united? Here we find linguist, engineer, author, sculptor, goldsmith, poet and painter in one individual, and this union of more than one profession not the exception, but rather the rule. Can genius, the offspring of the age, the culminating figure of generations of thought and work, which appears here and there in the great history of the world to mark the stepping-stones, the turning points of human advancement—can genius be attributed to every well known name of this period? Take any marked era in history, the Elizabethan in England, Louis XIV. in France, Golden Age of Greece, the Renaissance in Italy, and we behold a period of intellectual activity, of profound scholarship, side by side with the free development of art. It will be difficult, indeed, to point to an era where the two were not mutually dependent, or to point to many names on the scroll of fame whose claims to recognition were not based upon incessant application and laborious study. It is to be conceded that most, the best of us, must be content with the meed of talent alone, happy indeed, should that prove our allotted share, and doubly content should it, with all our superadded industry, lead us through the straight but rugged road to excellence.

We believe we have not done injustice in concluding that, heretofore, the American artist has underestimated the preparation necessary to begin his career, and that the failure to attain the highest vantage ground is attributable, not to our inferiority as a people in artistic taste and spirit, but rather to that characteristic national haste which endeavors to bridge a path which can only be traversed by patient plodding. The American artist has yet to learn, that in no profession are so many difficulties to be encountered and overcome, so many hardships to be endured, so much study to be undertaken; and that, withal, in no profession is the final reward of all his diligence so hedged with doubt and uncertainty.

There are none so blind but recognize the value of the education which they have failed to acquire, there are none so confident but have had reason to deplore their undivided attention to pencil and brush, to the neglect of other lines of study. Had art been servile copying, pencil and brush were all in all; but the value of a work of art is measured by the thought that is put into it, and the pleasure it affords is in proportion to the spontaneous sympathy it elicits. It is incredible that the dictum will ever prevail which substitutes lifeless imitation for vital thought; were it otherwise the mechanical processes would long since have driven the higher arts to the wall. No more pregnant aphorism has Ruskin uttered than that "the greatest artist is he who has embodied in the sum of his works the greatest number of greatest ideas." If ideas are essential elements of a true work of art, the weakest reasoning will serve to show the intimate connection between a high education and a noble expression in art, and that a mind which has failed to rise to the comprehension of broad and humanizing thoughts can never be expected to express itself except in a narrow, shallow or vulgar manner. The faculty which to all artists, whether musician, painter or poet, is universally regarded as most essential, is the imagination. What memory is to the servile copyist, imagination is to the true artist; through the materials already stored up in the mind it summons up the images of things past, it analyzes and decomposes associates and unites, contemplates and studies. Without it the worker becomes a drudge seeing only through the eyes, representing things as they are, not as they might better be, dealing only with facts, enjoying, it may be, a transitory motion in the *presence* of beauty, quickly awakened to be as quickly lost, making at last his work a soulless thing which the camera would far better perpetuate, as indeed, were the secrets of the studios known, it not infrequently does. With it the mind rises superior to the work, reproduces at will the images which have moved it, clothing them with vivacity and spirit, and retaining them as permanent objects of contemplation. As the well stored mind is the source whence the imagination, the poetic faculty of the artist draws its inspiration and its themes, it is fruitless to anticipate any growth or development of that faculty unless the springs are duly fed from which it takes its origin.

While it is true that all study tends to excise and unfold the imagination the kind of stimulant necessary largely depends upon the end to be attained. One with a mathematical and exact bent of mind will scarcely require the same incentives as his neighbor of artistic proclivities. The latter demands, in the first place, as a fundamental basis, an education *equal to the average of the age in which he lives*; but in addition he should supplement that

education by whatever has a direct or indirect bearing on his special pursuit. It is an old adage that "the painter paints himself," and therefore, whatever the character of his mind it will be manifested in his work. Among the many studies which challenge the artist's attention are the natural sciences; every phase of nature should arouse thoughtful investigation, nothing comes amiss, the lowly and the sublime, the ugly and the beautiful, active forces and nascent powers, all coalescing in the profound consideration of humanity as the highest type of nature and the ultimate goal of art. Hence philosophy which lays bare the lines of thought and discloses the springs of human conduct, which rounds the human animal into the sentient man; and history, the summary of all he has felt and achieved, should not be neglected. A general course of reading in imaginative literature, and more especially poetry, should be encouraged, and the principles of archæology sufficiently mastered to escape the charge of ignorance or indifference. And now, after having ransacked nature and the intellectual work of man, there still remains the history of art, the knowledge of what ground has been traversed; the work accomplished, its beauties and defects; what to emulate, what avoid, so that profiting by the experience of the past, the road to the future may be in the line of improvement and the germs of originality fostered.

Such, briefly stated, is the rough scheme of a course of study which fairly represents the artist's need. To what degree do our rising artists meet these requirements, if the yearly exhibitions are to be accepted as the criteria of our judgment? And to what shall we attribute the more or less pronounced failure in everything which indicates either originality of conception or poetry of imagination? Surely we can no longer plead our youth; a generation at least has already passed since our artistic career fairly began. And by the tentative efforts of that generation to what have we attained? Dexterity of hand, technique, and to some degree a sense of color, but in all else that constitutes the higher elements of art, bare mediocrity. Reflecting upon the character of the work accomplished, the ability and power displayed, the possibilities apparently within easy attainment, it is not unreasonable to assume that the hindrance to further advancement arises less from the difficulty of the road and the timid hesitation of the wayfarer, than from neglect to provide for the needs of the journey and ignorance of the path to be traversed. A true work of art combines within itself so many different elements, that to circumscribe it by any simple definition or measure it by any single quality seems altogether impossible. Neither idea, invention, composition, drawing, action, color or technique can be separately accepted, to the exclusion of the others. The sooner our artists have learned this simple fact, the better for them and for our native art; the sooner they have comprehended the extended requirements of their profession, the nearer shall we rise to the high level of the schools abroad, and American art, instead of standing dismayed at the prospect of free trade in foreign works, will proudly and confidently court the competition.

OBSERVER.

TWILIGHT FANCIES.

I am sitting in the twilight, in a room in Gotham town,
While an equinoctial's howling down the street;
And I seem to see a maiden, in a chip hat and a gown,
Picking buttercups and daisies at my feet.

She very gravely ties them, as she picks them, in a bunch,
With a piece of far off Ea-tern cotton thread;
Then I very gravely ask her if it isn't time for lunch,
And she very gravely shakes her pretty head.

The tall grass in the distance rolls in undulating waves,
The feathered bards and bees sing roundelays;
And the Santa Clara softly, as the wind o'er nameless graves,
Ripples, down the slope, of coming golden days.

I watch the dainty maiden thro' an afternoon in June,
And I romp with her thro' daisy-covered dells;
Then I—Hark! my old Italian clock is chiming out a tune,
And I swear I hear again the mission bells!

But the maiden, picking buttercups and daisies at my feet?
How the gale sings thro' yon telegraphic wires!
Making music as delicious as her voice—and low and sweet
As the chanting of the old Franciscan Friars.

September 17th, 1885.

JOHN ERNEST McCANN.